Parents, children gain confidence to support healthy family meals

**Description:** The Family Table project engaged low-income and rural families with school-age children in identifying practical and feasible strategies for overcoming obstacles faced in creating healthy mealtime patterns. The project increased accessibility to and consumption of healthy, whole foods through an interactive meal preparation program in Barron, Dunn, Polk, Pierce and St. Croix counties.

**Relevance:** During 2010, the West Central Wisconsin Community Action Agency received requests for assistance from 5,107 households in Barron, Chippewa, Dunn, Pepin, Pierce, Polk and St. Croix counties. Almost three-quarters of these households reported income below 100 percent of the federal poverty level, 31 percent were headed by a single parent and almost 300 households reported being homeless.

In its 2010 needs assessment of low-income households, the agency reported a 47 percent increase in Food Share program participation over a three-year period. Also, 45 percent of households reported using food pantries to supplement their groceries.

**Results:** Project leaders developed a learner-centered curriculum to enhance nutrition knowledge and introduce basic cooking concepts. Participating families met weekly for two-hour classes that focused on increasing fruit and vegetable consumption, using more whole foods and less processed foods, adapting and improvising recipes to incorporate fresh fruits and vegetables, and creating meals that make the most of available time and money.

UW Extension’s Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program (WNEP) was a vital partner in the effort. WNEP nutrition educators participated in curriculum development and revision and led every class session, which represented an enormous leveraging of in-kind human resources. Each class included participatory nutrition education, cooking demonstrations, hands-on meal preparation and facilitated discussion over shared meals. More than 200 adults and children participated in at least some classes during the 11 multi-week sessions.

Participants were asked to complete surveys at the beginning and end of each session, and data was collected on 25 adults who responded on behalf of their participating family members. Results showed statistically significant improvement in three areas: including children in meal preparation, confidence in healthy meal-planning skills and confidence in health meal preparation within time constraints.

Project leaders hoped to train peer leaders who could help sustain the classes through voluntary cooking clubs. However, this component was not implemented because of the difficulty in recruiting and maintaining participants. Notably, though, some families made new social connections and planned to stay in touch after the session concluded.

Momentum has been sustained through WNEP, which has integrated Family Table into its regular programming and continues to organize, lead and evaluate class sessions with diverse audiences, including participants in the Women, Infants and Children program and Hispanic families.


Powers, P. “Family Table unites families in Menomonie around healthy meals.” Eau Claire Leader-Telegram. February 27, 2013.